DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 031 CS 214 867

AUTHOR Penticoff, Richard
TITLE Complicating Community: Constructing the Social in Theory, Research, and Practice.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Individualism; Individual Power; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Social Constructivism; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, a growing number of composition scholars and teachers have urged that their colleagues view writing as a social practice. Social factors in some way condition, shape, influence, or determine writers, writing events, and texts. It should be noted, however, that this latter statement already frames a kind of analysis: one that starts from social categories like gender and class and proceeds through some social force to their effects on individuals. Analysis can also start from the other direction, from the individual writers's attempt to act--symbolically, rhetorically--and in doing so collectively create social structures. Both approaches are illustrated to some degree in the work of Linda Brodkey, particularly when that work is looked at sequentially. Some work emphasizes how individual writers construct meaningful social practices through language. Some emphasizes how social structures "govern" particular instances of language use. What motivates her work is a need to serve both ends of the social/individual binary. The problem becomes how to explain agency as more than a deterministic reaction while not losing the heavy constraints of social situatedness. Brodkey turns to Stuart Hall's idea of articulation for a theoretical tool. It suggests that discourses may intend to place individuals in particular social positions but individuals need not comply; there are a number of subject positions and discourses available to the individual. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Richard Penticoff

Department of English

University of Idaho

Moscow, ID 83844-1102

208-885-6823

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R Penticoff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 384 031

Complicating Community: Constructing the Social in Theory, Research, and Practice

For several years now, lots of people have been urging those of us who invoke community as a goal for our writing classrooms or as an analytic concept with which to study writing practices to complicate our notion in order to take account of difference. Given that there are ***this minute*** busy political beavers—not coincidentally, a species of rodent—trying to eradicate difference from our social life, this strikes me as an even more urgent task. In the first part of my presentation I'm going to talk about the problems posed for social analysis by a traditional binary—individual vs. social. This binary—and the way its terms have been conceptualized—make it difficult to think of differences as anything but inherent or, strangely enough, accidental; still always aberrant. In the second half of the paper I'm going to think through a possible way out of the binary. I ask you to consider this very much a work in progress.

Over the past 15 years, a growing number of composition scholars and teachers have urged that their colleagues view writing as a social practice. Depending on the person one reads or listen to, this argument can mean different things. For some, it means creating the social interactions, like conversing, reading aloud, sharing written text, collaborating on projects, that bring a trope, writing as social, to life in classrooms. For others, it means trying to theorize the relationships between social categories like gender or discourse and specific

CS214867

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

writers, writing events, or texts. For others, it means looking for empirical evidence of the theoretical claims.

Impetus for these activities has come from some commonsensical observations. For instance, noticing that the same text is read differently if authorship is attributed to different genders. Or that writers shape similar ideas differently for different audiences. Or that students from non-mainstream social classes, races, and ethnic groups often constitute a greater percentage of the population of basic writing courses in relation to their numbers in a university generally. Sometimes the impetus has come from not-so-commonsensical observations, for instance, that scientists rhetorically shape their discussions of "objective" phenomena, phenomena which, by right of their status as facts, should speak for themselves without any rhetorical embellishment.

These observations, and others like them, have persuaded many scholars and teachers that social factors in some way condition, shape, influence, or determine writers, writing events, and texts. So research and theory have proceeded to further questions: what specific social factors and how exactly do they work? That is, what exactly do we mean when we say that gender or social class conditions, shapes, influences, or determines some act of writing?

Note that the way I have asked this question already frames a kind of analysis: one that starts from social categories like gender or class and proceeds, through some social force, to their effects on individuals. Analysis can also start from the other direction, from individual writers' attempts to act—symbolically, rhetorically—and in so doing collectively create social structures.

I think an example would help illustrate these two kinds of social analysis. Say I want to explain why some writers use a lot of comma splices. An analysis that starts from social categories would assume that knowledge of sentence boundaries is a social convention. This knowledge is generated, possessed, guarded, and disseminated by particular social groups, let's say members of a specific class, race, and gender. The analysis then assumes that the behaviors of individuals are determined largely by their membership in a social group.

Through some social force—power, identification, socialization, whatever—knowledge of sentence boundaries is distributed—or not—according to one's social affiliation. Under this analysis, individuals that are most different from the group that controls knowledge about sentence boundaries will be most likely to produce comma splices (because they are less likely to have that knowledge distributed to them).

A pretty crude example, to be sure, but one similar to some of Patricia Bizzell's early accounts of basic writers (see "'Inherent,'" "College Composition," "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty").

Now here's an analysis from the other perspective. This analysis assumes that individuals use punctuation in meaningful ways in order to perform a social action. So, lots of comma splices may not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge—an error—but rather an attempt to construe sentence boundaries in personally meaningful ways. This individual act is social because it can, when communicated, become part of a ***collective*** understanding of sentence boundaries. The claim here is that individual acts of constructing sentence boundaries, collected together, constitute the social convention people follow when they write.

Again, a crude example, but one not unlike David Bartholomae's analysis in "Inventing the University."

Both these forms of analysis have been challenged on substantive grounds. The analysis which starts from social categories has been challenged because it implies that individuals are mere effects, dupes, of social categories and forces and therefore exert negligible control over their own activities. This normative objection says that, by definition, humans have free will, and so we must have a theory which accounts for this moral fact. Another challenge argues that not all individuals behave as predicted by the social theory. This is an empirical claim which calls for adjusting (not abandoning) the theory, generally by adding social categories to the mix.

The principal objections to analyses which start from the individual's perspective are that it's not clear how one gets from individual meaning-making activities to social structures

or why it is that individually intended actions often have unintended consequences. It's also not clear why, if individual actions are so (potentially) free and variable, the social structures which are supposed to result from individuals' meaning-making (structuring) activities persist in remarkably stable, unchanging form over time.

I have now reproduced a set of binaries familiar to those who do social theory and research: given structures vs. chosen actions; social vs. individual; object vs. subject; objective fact vs. subjective meaning; macro vs. micro. I would argue that research and theory from either perspective leads to a dilemma, if not a dead-end. Either everything belongs to a social whole and individuals exist only as means toward the functioning of the whole; this is classic holism familiar in popular images of biological organisms or ecologies. Or individuals and the social are fundamentally separate and the relations between them are accidental; this is classic atomism. In both cases, an object—organism or atom—is a closed system: fundamental, irreducible, an end in and of itself.

I'm going to take a step down the abstraction ladder and turn to a discussion of some work that addresses these issues in interesting and productive ways. I'm going to begin my discussion with the work of our panel chair, Linda Brodkey. This may strike you all as a bit incestuous, but the choice, I assure you, is not idiosyncratic. My discussion here is part of a larger project investigating the history of a movement, the "social perspective," as it has developed, been understood, and used in Composition Studies over the last 20 years. I am constructing this history through a number of parallel and I hope interacting narratives: narratives of ***social structures***, like disciplines, intellectual traditions, institutions, and cultural forces, that have made individual scholarly work possible and then narratives of ***individual scholars*** whose work has contributed to shaping both an understanding of social perspectives as well as the social structures themselves. Brodkey is one of seven scholars whose work I focus on in the book.

I'll begin with this observation: there is an interesting division to Linda's work when read sequentially, as I have done. Some work emphasizes how individual writers construct

meaningful social practices through language. Some emphasizes how social structures "govern" particular instances of language use. This division doesn't hold for all her work (it's rather more true of her later writing than of the earlier), and it doesn't show itself as neatly as I imply it does here, but I'm using it because it provides a way for me to make sense of why in some works she is more concerned with what she calls "lived experience" and in others she's focusing more on social structures she calls "discourses." As you might suspect, given what I've talked about in the first half of this paper, I'm going to read this pattern as Linda's way of trying to work past the individual/social binary. What I'm going to be interested in the rest of the way is ***how*** she tries to do this.

I'll start with an essay she published in 1992, "Articulating Poststructural Theory in Research and Practice" and work out from it. Overall, the essay is concerned with making a case for theory in orienting literacy research and practice; in particular, it makes a case for using poststructural theories of discourse and language. For Brodkey, discourses are social structures which "warrant variable subject positions" ("On the Subjects of Class and Gender" 126) and provide categories for knowing the world. She posits, "with some reservations," that "at least five discourses are available to those of us who live in the West—science, law, art, education, and religion and/or ethics" ("Writing and the Politics of Difference" 5). Discourses are akin to ideologies and world views, but are not the same as texts or languages. Discourses, while apparently socially constructed, aren't the result of individual constructions, and in fact, seem to resist change altogether. Brodkey speaks of the "nearly invisible influence of discourses over our ability to imagine and reflect on who we are in ourselves and in relation to others and the world" ("Articulating Poststructural Theory" 300). Not only do discourses have a "nearly invisible influence" but the relative lack of direct description of them implies they have an equally shadowy existence as entities in and of themselves.

Perhaps the lack of specificity is because Brodkey is less interested in discourses than in the way ***possibilities***—of thought, of social or psychological identity—are materialized through discursive ***practices*** like texts. In two essays where she offers her theory of discourse, it is done in the service of textual analysis. For example, in "On the Subjects of Class

and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters'" she looks at how teachers' letters to women enrolled in an Adult Basic Education class articulate the discourse of education; in "Voice Lessons in a Poststructural Key," she and Jim Henry look at how student texts and teacher comments (assignments written for an architecture class) articulate the discourses of education, art, and science. In brief, her claim is that a discourse, like that of education, offers subject positions, like teacher and student, for participants to identify with. And a discourse doesn't offer one but many possibilities for those occupying, say, the teacher subject position. For example, in "The Literacy Letters" study, teachers in a graduate basic writing seminar agree to exchange letters with adult students in a Adult Basic Education class. Though a "school" project for both groups, theirs is an "extracurricular relationship" outside normal educational structures and strictures. Teachers (and students) attempt to write to each other as peers. Despite the intention to circumvent institutional roles, Brodkey claims that both teachers and students operate within possibilities offered by educational discourse in the United States: for example, teachers initiate the exchanges, students respond. Moreover, the teachers confound both their professed hopes for and students' attempts at reciprocity by controlling the topics. They do this by ignoring or redirecting discussions relating to their students' working class circumstances: the murder of a "good frineds husband," the difficulty of accumulating enough downpayment for a house, or the showering of material gifts on Mothers' Day. So, what begins as an attempt to relate not as institutional subjects (teacher/student) but as peers (by exchanging letters and writing about personal topics), ends with the people reproducing the ***dominant*** possibility of educational discourse, where teachers control students.

What motivates Brodkey's kind of analysis, that is, the need for both discourse ***and*** discursive practice as analytical tools, is her attempt to serve both ends of the social/individual binary. From the very beginning of her publishing career, she has acknowledged and argued for the socially-situated nature of writing and language use. Her concept of discourse is an account of a social structure that sets out the conditions of possibility for any instance of lan-

guage use; it offers a means for explaining that writers' options in any given circumstance are limited, even determined and that these constraints are social rather than psychological, biological, or cognitive. On the other hand, she wants to keep alive "the possibility of imagining people as agents of their own lives" ("Articulating" 312). She keeps the possibility of human agency alive through her discussions of discursive practices and lived experience.

People live their experiences through discursive practices. Key to the notion of practice and its relation to agency for Brodkey is that it is active, a doing. But since even motors, plants, and paramecia can be described as active, though not agents of their actions, something more is obviously needed. Traditionally, the concepts of free will or choice have described this something more. Such concepts don't work in poststructural theories for reasons you're all likely familiar with; the main one is the assumption that free-willed subjects can act independently of external or even internal constraints. The problem becomes: how to explain agency as more than a deterministic reaction while not losing the heavy constraints of social situatedness? Brodkey turns to Stuart Hall for a theoretical tool.

She claims that "Hall has reinserted the possibility of human agency into poststructural theory" through his concept of articulation:

> By *articulation* Hall means both utterance and connection, in the second definition trying to capture the fact that an articulated joint may or may not connect to another. Discourses may *intend* to construct social identities, but a theory of articulation is needed to distinguish between the hegemonic intentions and the uneven effects of discourse in practice. ("Voice Lessons" 146)

That is to say, discourses may intend to place individuals in particular subject positions, but individuals don't always identify with the positions offered them. For Hall and Brodkey, agency is possible because: 1) there are, theoretically at least, a variety of discourses and subject positions available to subjects at any time; and 2) an individual's desire to identify with a subject position doesn't always match a discourse's intention to place subjects in a particular position. Variety creates the possibility of agency; desire executes it.

I would argue that articulation provides a beginning means for working past the social/individual binary because articulation is a relational concept. For what this means, I turn now to a scholar who has used relational analyses to work through the antinomies of traditional thinking, Martha Minow in her book, ***Making All the Difference***. Dilemmas of difference, like the social/individual binary, result when people focus on individuals as social atoms and assign differences like race or physical handicap to them. When difference belongs to individuals, the ways of dealing with it—ignoring it, discriminating on the basis of it, or singling out different people for special treatment to overcome discrimination or neglect—always make it the ***different*** person's problem, never the problem of the normal person. Minow's way out of this dilemma is to focus on relationships which value people differentially. For example, mainstreaming Amy Rowley, a deaf child, in a public school classroom ignores her difference from hearing children and denies her the full learning opportunities available to "normal" kids; to gain the same benefits, Amy has to somehow overcome her difference. Giving her a tutor singles her out for special treatment (she is still the different one). Sending her to a school for the deaf would be akin to exiling her. In all cases, the problem is Amy's because the difference, hearing disability, belongs to her and her alone. Minow argues that when Amy is seen as part of a group of relationships a way out is possible. Amy's relationship to her classmates is defined through her ability to communicate. Communication is a relation effected through various tools. All participants in communication can learn to use more than one tool. So, just as Amy can learn to lip-read, her classmates can learn sign language. Thus, says Minow, difference no longer belongs to Amy alone but is part of a relationship negotiated among group members.

A similar focus on relations is necessary to work past the limits of the social/individual binary in theory and research. In Brodkey's analysis of the literacy letters, for example, individuals are not simply effects of education discourse; alternatives ***are*** available and the teachers and students do try to activate them. On the other hand, educational discourse is not simply the result of individuals' simultaneous, collective actions. The discourse precedes, and

indeed, structures their actions. So, the social is neither an undifferentiated whole nor a collection of free-acting individuals. The relation of articulation—and actually it's desire, the desire of discourses to place individuals and the desire of individuals to identify with a discursive position, which is the content of the relation (articulation serves more as a means for channeling desire)—provides a necessary connection between individuals and social structures without reducing one to another. On paper, at least, Brodkey's analysis overcomes the binary.

Here's where I'm supposed to swell toward a nice, pointed conclusion, but I have to admit I've reached the limits of my own analysis. I'd like to say that Minow's relational analysis works better for the individual case, while Brodkey's works better for the general case. If so, I think it's because Minow's different situations—deaf children in mainstream classrooms, workplace leave for family contingencies, housing for the mentally ill in single-family neighborhoods—suggest different kinds of relationships at work. And for this reason, not all situations can be analyzed the same way. Very lawyer-like. What Minow doesn't address is how these specific situations fit into a social whole where large scale structures like discourses enter into relationships with individuals. For this situation, Brodkey's analysis is more appropriate.

While it seems I have worked myself out of one problem only to work myself into another, I think the problems are different in kind. Binaries might be the result of what Donna Haraway calls a god-trick: the attempt to see all from any single vantage point (though of course the trick is on us because the social/individual binary gives us only ***two*** vantage points from which to view human social life). Differences of ***scale***, which I think is the difference between Brodkey and Minow's analyses, may be the limit of what partial vision offers us, a kind of Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle for social analysis. Traditional analysis tells us comma splices are a difference that belongs to individuals. Brodkey and Minow's analyses suggest comma splices result from and are valued within ***relations***—between writers and texts, texts and readers, writers and readers, students and teachers. In my own work, I find the relational analysis more productive for theory and practice because it doesn't allow us to see community (the social) as an undifferentiated whole or as an *ad hoc* collection of social atoms. Relations complicate the intellectual comforts offered by assigning difference or value

to one or another side of a binary.

Works Cited

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing-Process Problems. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 134-65.

Bizzell, Patricia. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing." Pre/Text 3.3 (1982): 213-43.

---. "College Composition: Initiation Into the Academic Discourse Community." Curriculum Inquiry 12.2 (1982): 191-207.

---, and Bruce Herzberg. "'Inherent' Ideology, 'Universal' History, 'Empirical' Evidence, and 'Context-free' Writing: Some Problems in E. D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition." Modern Language Notes 95.5 (1980): 1181-202.

Brodkey, Linda. "Articulating Poststructural Theory in Research on Literacy." Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Literacy Research. Ed. Richard Beach, et al. Urbana, IL: National Conference on Research in English/National Council of Teachers of English, 1992. 293-318.

---. "On the Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters'" College English 51.2 (1989): 125-41.

---. "Writing and the Politics of Difference." Paper Presented at Rutgers University. 1989.

---, and Jim Henry. "Voice Lessons in a Poststructural Key: Notes on Response and Revision." A Rhetoric of Doing: Essays on Written Discourse in Honor of James L. Kinneavy. Ed. Stephen P. Witte, Neil Nakadate, and Roger D. Cherry. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 144-60.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge, 1991. 183-201.

Minow, Martha. Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990.